

Message Text

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USIA-04 AID-05 COME-00 EB-03 FRB-01 TRSE-00 XMB-01

OPIC-02 CIEP-01 LAB-01 SIL-01 OMB-01 SPM-01 HEW-01

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INFO USCINCSO

C O N F I D E N T I A L GUATEMALA 5534

CINCSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, GT

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT LAUGERUD MEETS THE PRESS

SUMMARY: GUATEMALAN PRESIDENT IS KEEPING HIS PLEDGE TO HOLD MONTHLY EXTEMPORANEOUS PRESS CONFERENCES ON PRIME TIME RADIO AND TV. HE TAKES HARD AS WELL AS EASY QUESTIONS AND HANDLES THEM SKILLFULLY. HIGHLIGHTS OF MOST RECENT CONFERENCE INCLUDE SURPRISINGLY FAVORABLE STATEMENT ON BIRTH CONTROL, A NOTICEABLE LACK OF SUPPORT FOR HIS MINISTER OF PUBLIC WORKS, CONTINUED PROMISES OF GOVERNMENT AUSTERITY AND NO NEW TAXES, AND A HARD LINE TOWARD LABOR UNION ACTIVITY BY TEACHERS. END SUMMARY.

1. ADOPTING A US CUSTOM THAT IS NOT USUAL PRACTICE IN GUATEMALA OR MANY OTHER COUNTRIES, PRESIDENT KJELL LAUGERUD HAS HELD NO-HOLDS-BARRED PRESS CONFERENCES MONTHLY SINCE HIS INAUGURATION JULY 1. HIS LATEST, CONFIDENTIAL

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SEPTEMBER 30, LASTED TWO HOURS AND FIFTEEN MINUTES AND

COVERED EVERY MAJOR AND MANY MINOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ISSUES, INCLUDING SUCH SENSITIVE ONE AS BIRTH CONTROL (REPORTED SEPARATELY), DISAPPEARANCE OF JOURNALISTS AND OPPOSITION POLITICIANS, RELATIONS WITH CUBA, AND CONGRESSIONAL INQUIRY INTO CHARGES OF CORRUPTION AGAINST HIS MINISTER OF PUBLIC WORKS. DUE TO LENGTH OF CONFERENCE, ONLY HALF WAS BROADCAST ON PRIME TIME RADIO AND TV SEPTEMBER 30, REMAINDER BEING SHOWN THE FOLLOWING EVENING. FORMAT WAS IN THREE PARTS: PREPARED STATEMENT (LENGTHY AND DRY RECITAL OF STATISTICS ON HURRICANE FIFI DAMAGE), ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED IN WRITING BY JOURNALISTS, AND IMPROMPTU ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ASKED FROM THE FLOOR BY LARGE CROWD OF NEWSPAPERMEN.

2. PRESIDENT, TO PUT IT KINDLY, IS NOT A NATURAL PUBLIC SPEAKER; GESTURES, EXPRESSION AND TONE ARE UNIFORMLY WOODEN. BUT AS CONFERENCE MOVED INTO UNREHEARSED PORTION (AND PRESIDENT SPOKE FROM HIS SEAT RATHER THAN STANDING), HIS PERFORMANCE GREW MUCH MORE NATURAL AND RELAXED. MORE IMPORTANTLY, HIS LANGUAGE THROUGHOUT WAS SIMPLE AND CLEAR, AVOIDING VERBAL PADDING SO CHARACTERISTIC OF LATIN PUBLIC SPEAKING, AND HE WAS NEVER INDECISIVE. EVEN WHEN FACED A COUPLE OF TIMES BY QUESTIONS ON PROBLEMS HE WAS NOT FAMILIAR WITH, HE ANSWERED WITH A CRISP AND UNHESITATING "I'LL HAVE THAT LOOKED INTO." OVERALL IMPRESSION WAS OF PRESIDENT WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS TO DO AND IS FIRMLY IN CHARGE.

3. PRESIDENT KEPT COOL AND OBJECTIVE TONE THROUGHOUT, EVEN ON MOST OF SENSITIVE ISSUES MENTIONED ABOVE, WITH TWO NOTABLE EXCEPTIONS: CUBA (SEE GUATEMALA 5411) AND THE TEACHERS' STRIKE. ON BOTH, HIS EMOTION CAME THROUGH AS GENUINE AND DEEPLY FELT, ALTHOUGH THERE WERE ALSO POLITICAL REASONS - HIS NEED TO HOLD THE ALLEGIANCE OF RIGHT-WING POLITICAL PARTIES WHICH SUPPORTED HIM FOR PRESIDENT - FOR TAKING POSITIONS HE DID.

4. TEACHERS' STRIKE. TEACHERS IN QUEZALTENANGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS BEGAN STRIKE ON DAY OF PRESS CONFERENCE IN PROTEST AGAINST DECISION OF MINISTER OF EDUCATION TO TRANSFER
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TWO TEACHERS (TWO WEEKS BEFORE END OF SCHOOL YEAR) TO DISTANT CITIES. TEACHERS ARE ACCUSED OF VIOLATIONS OF LAW
BUT FACT THEY ARE ACTIVE IN MILITANT TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION IS NOT COINCIDENTAL. LAUGERUD SAID TWO SHOULD ACCEPT THEIR TRANSFERS AND CONTINUE THEIR CLAIMS OF UNFAIR TREATMENT THROUGH ADMINISTRATIVE CHANNELS FROM THEIR NEW POSTS. HE REFUSED TO NEGOTIATE WHILE

ILLEGAL STRIKE IN PROGRESS AND TEACHERS REFUSING OBEY PROPER ORDERS OF MINISTER. IN RARE USE OF DEMAGOGIC TECHNIQUES, PRESIDENT POINTED OUT STRIKE WOULD NOT HURT CHILDREN OF RICH, WHO ARE IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS, BUT CHILDREN OF POOR WHO ENTITLE TO "SCARED BREAD" OF EDUCATION. INTERESTS OF CHILDREN SHOULD COME BEFORE INTERESTS OF LABOR UNION. COMMENT: NEITHER PRESIDENT NOR HIS CABINET UNDERSTAND OR HAVE ANY SYMPATHY FOR MODERN TRADE UNIONISM. WHETHER HARD-LINE APPROACH WILL BE SUCCESSFUL IN DEALING WITH THIS PARTICULAR STRIKE IS QUESTION ON WHICH EMBASSY WILL REPORT SEPARATELY. END COMMENT.

5. MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC WORKS. GUSTAVO ANZUETO, ONE OF THREE HOLDOVERS IN LAUGERUD CABINET FROM ARANA ADMINISTRATION, HAS BEEN CHARGED BY OPPOSITION CONGRESSMEN WITH CORRUPTION ON AQUEDUCT AND ELECTRIC POWER PROJECTS (GUATEMALA A-169). ASKED ABOUT THE CHARGES, LAUGERUD SAID HIS ADMINISTRATION HAD NOTHING TO HIDE AND SAID ANY CONGRESSMAN OR FOR THAT MATTER ANY CITIZEN WELCOME TO INSPECT OFFICIAL RECORDS FOR HIMSELF. COMMENT: ALLEGED CORRUPTION WOULD HAVE OCCURRED, OF COURSE, IN ARANA GOVERNMENT, AS PRESIDENT'S CAREFULLY CHOSEN WORDS MADE CLEAR. SIGNIFICANTLY, PRESIDENT EXPRESSED NO SUPPORT OR DEFENSE FOR HIS EMBATTLED MINISTER, WHO IS EXPECTED TO BE INTERPELLED BY CONGRESS OCTOBER 9. PRIVATE AND PUBLIC COMMENTS FROM GOVERNMENT CONGRESSMEN INDICATE THAT ANZUETO'S STORY HAD BETTER BE GOOD.

6. DIVISION OF SPOILS. ASKED ABOUT UNHAPPINESS ON PART OF SOME OF GOVERNMENT COALITION PARTIES BECAUSE THEY FELT INSUFFICIENTLY REWARDED IN DISTRIBUTION OF GOVERNMENT JOBS, LAUGERUD DENIED THAT THERE

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WAS ANY COOLING OF RELATIONS BETWEEN HIM AND PARTIES, BUT ADMITTED THERE WERE SOME WHO WANTED NEW BROOM TO SWEEP CLEAN OVERNIGHT. OUT OF SOME 53,000 GOVERNMENT JOBS, HE HAD MADE 430 APPOINTMENTS, OF WHOM ONLY HALF HAD SO FAR TAKEN OFFICE. UNFORTUNATELY, HE SAID WITH SMILE, THERE AREN'T ENOUGH JOBS FOR ALL THOSE WHO VOTED FOR US. COMMENT: PRESIDENT MIGHT HAVE ADDED THAT SHOULD ANZUETO FALL, OR BE PUSHED, THERE WOULD BE ONE LESS- AND SPECIFICALLY ONE LESS FOR ANZUETO'S PARTY, THE MLN, WHICH HAS BEEN LOUDEST PROTESTER OVER ITS SHARE OF PATRONAGE.

7. HUMAN RIGHTS. PRESIDENT WAS ASKED ABOUT DISAPPEARANCE LAST SPRING OF REPORTER WERNER TREJO ALVAREZ AND HERBERT

MACDONALD, A JOURNALIST'S SON (GUATEMALA A-109) AND ABOUT "KIDNAPPING" OF TWO CAMPESINOS IN SEPTEMBER (GUATEMALA A-169). LAUGERUD EXPRESSED REGRET THAT DESPITE ALL POSSIBLE EFFORTS NOTHING HAD BEEN LEARNED IN TREJO AND MACDONALD CASES. CAMPESINOS WERE NOT KIDNAPPED BUT UNDER ARREST FOR PUTTING UP PGT BANNERS ON ITS 25TH ANNIVERSARY. COMMENT: IN LONG, SAD HISTORY OF GUATEMALAN POLITICAL VIOLENCE, IT IS AT LEAST COMMENDABLE THAT THESE QUESTIONS WERE PUBLICLY ASKED. AN INTERESTING OMISSION: ANY QUESTION ON WHAT ACTION WOULD BE TAKEN AGAINST ARRESTED MURDERERS OF BROTHER OF OPPOSITION PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE RIOS MONTT (A-169). ANDREWS

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